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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. Northern Ireland Women's European Platform is an umbrella organization representing women's organizations, affiliated groups, individuals and observers from across Northern Ireland.

2. The education of women and girls and their equal access to full employment and decent work is central to progressing gender equality, but this is particularly true in conflict and post-conflict societies where women's economic independence and full participation in public life is for lasting peace and stability.

3. As elsewhere in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and in many other parts of the world, Northern Ireland has seen significant advances in educational opportunities for girls. Women's participation in paid work has increased yet significant inequalities remain in educational and labour market opportunities and outcomes. These include gender pay gap, occupational segregation, stereotyping of women's and men's roles and structural barriers which reduce women's access to full and equal employment.

4. The economic recession and the impact of public sector cuts on Great Britain and Northern Ireland have, and will continue to have a negative impact on women's employment.

5. The barriers to women's equal participation and progression in paid work in Northern Ireland include:

(a) Inadequate childcare provision;

(b) Gender pay gap;

(c) Occupational segregation;

(d) Concentration of women in particular areas of the part-time labour market;

(e) Hidden women in the economy;

(f) Stereotyping of women and men;

(g) Inequalities in educational opportunities and how these translate to the labour market;

(h) Underrepresentation of women in decision-making.

Paid work

6. The employment rate for women in Northern Ireland is 61.4 per cent, 4.1 per cent less than in Great Britain. There continues to be gender differences in employment between women and men. Women are much more likely to work part-time which impacts on earnings (the most significant pay gap is in relation to part-time employment) and progression opportunities. The number of female part-time jobs has increased by 66 per cent since 1984. Much of this growth has been in service sector employment in Northern Ireland between 1997 and 2007. However, this is a low-pay sector, with little security for women. It is also a sector which has been disproportionately affected by the economic recession. The decision of women

* Issued without formal editing.

to work part-time is frequently portrayed by Government as a "choice". However there is considerable evidence that women are constrained in their employment opportunities by the lack of affordable childcare and their unpaid caring work.

7. Women are significantly underrepresented in engineering, building and planning and technology and highly overrepresented in health and social care and hospitality and retail sectors. Evidence suggests that reasons for this include stereotypical careers and training advice and a stereotypical and limited range of options for girls and women on Government training programmes. Even in areas where there is a predominance of female employees they are underrepresented in management and on the boards of companies.

8. Figures for 2009 record the female level of entrepreneurial activity in Northern Ireland at 2.4 per cent compared to 8 per cent for males. This is equal to a potential shortfall of 28,000 female-owned businesses if the rates for women and men were equal. Entrepreneurial activity is particularly low among young women. It is also relatively low among the 45-54 age groups, and in this age band the gap between women in Northern Ireland and those across the rest of the United Kingdom is widest.

Childcare

9. Northern Ireland lags behind Britain in relation to childcare provision and the ratio of childcare places is 1:6.4 compared to 1:4 in England. The national childcare strategy introduced by the Westminster Government was not introduced in Northern Ireland, nor does Northern Ireland have an equivalent of the 2006 UK Childcare Act, which placed a statutory duty on public authorities to provide childcare. The need for a comprehensive and adequately resourced childcare strategy for Northern Ireland has been identified by successive research studies and consultations. The urgency of this need is exacerbated by the introduction of stringent welfare to work policy in Northern Ireland in 2010, which places conditionality on lone parents with a child aged 7 or over receiving social protection benefits to show that they are actively seeking work. In Britain, enhanced childcare provision was seen by Government as a necessary precondition for such legislation.

Education

10. Educational outcomes for girls in many areas exceed those of young men leading to a belief that there are few equality issues. However, educational outcomes are also influenced by other factors such as social class and ethnicity and many young women experience multiple disadvantages and end up in a group of young people not in employment, education or training. Young women in this group have often disengaged from education as a result of teenage pregnancy, caring responsibilities or difficult home lives. Recent research from the United Kingdom's Institute for Public Policy Research indicates that overall youth unemployment in the United Kingdom stands at 18 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds, the highest level in 15 years. Its research also found that among 16 to 24 year olds, unemployment is highest for those with no qualifications. For young women, unemployment had increased by nearly 18 per cent since March 2008. The Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland estimates that of the 24,000 newly unemployed in Northern Ireland last year, approximately 9,000 (37.5 per cent) were aged between 18 and 24 and when compared to the United Kingdom average, youth unemployment is now a

bigger problem in Northern Ireland with the rate above the United Kingdom average of 18.0 per cent for July-September 2009. Figures for Northern Ireland also compare unfavourably with many Organization for Economic Cooperation in Europe countries.

Decision-making and public life

11. We would strongly argue that the limited progress in Northern Ireland in relation to equality for women and girls is linked to underrepresentation and marginalization of women in decision-making. In the current legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland only 15 out of 108 members are women. Only 22 per cent of councillors in local government are women and fewer than 34 per cent of members of public bodies are women (these bodies are responsible for significant aspects of public administration in Northern Ireland, including health and social care, education and equality). Research with young women in Northern Ireland identified that they are "still waiting for equality" and feel they have little opportunity to change this. Despite pressure from international bodies, including the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and obligations set out in Security Council resolution 1325 and measures set out in the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland there has been a lack of concrete measures to address this underrepresentation. Even where measures have been introduced, such as the Sex Discrimination Election Candidates Act, this has not been used.

Impact on legacy of conflict on young women

12. In Northern Ireland the tendency has been to focus on young men in terms of discussion and policies relating to conflict and peacebuilding. Research findings demonstrate that the conflict has had a significant impact on the lives of young women, on opportunities, and how they view their communities and society. Living in segregation, fear and hardship has restricted opportunities in many areas of their lives, including education and employment. There have been few opportunities for young women to understand, make sense of, and deal with their experiences of growing up in a country with such a bloody past nor indeed has there been sufficient acknowledgment of, or attention given, to the fact that broader gender inequalities between men and women have exacerbated the invisibility of women and girls. We would recommend that there needs to be a greater acknowledgement of the impact of the conflict on girls and young women to ensure they have a voice and take leadership positions.

13. Northern Ireland Women's European Platform recommends that:

(a) Measures be taken to address the educational disadvantages of girls and young women by tackling underachievement, and to recognize the root causes of disadvantage and ensure opportunities through formal and informal education to re-engage with education;

(b) Negative language such as "economically inactive" be removed, and the financial contribution that women make to the economy in their roles as carers, family businesses and agriculture be calculated and recognized;

(c) The inequalities created by the fact that women and girls continue to provide substantial unpaid caring work, and the financial and other disadvantages resulting from this, be addressed;

(d) The gender pay gap be closed by strengthening legislation and policies implementing these by the "fast track", and mandatory pay audits and flexible working arrangements for men and women be introduced;

(e) Stereotyping be eradicated in occupations by ensuring education and careers advice is non-gendered and encourages girls and women to enter non-traditional areas;

(f) The urgent need for childcare strategies be met, with high quality affordable childcare with clear implementation targets. Childcare should be recognized as a family issue;

(g) Governments commit to ensuring that budget changes do not affect women disproportionately;

(h) In providing the opportunities to increase the access of women and young girls to full employment, Member States address the lack of women in decision-making and politics. This should include the introduction of special temporary measures as recommended by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2008. Governments should ensure compliance with the obligations set out in Security Council resolution 1325 (2000).